

TEXT, FOR THE RECORD

The Freedom to Reform

(Reformation 1967)

by GERHARD O. FORDE

This Reformation address was found among Gerhard O. Forde's unpublished papers. It is simply dated 1967. Beyond its reference to an evening celebration of the 450th anniversary of the Reformation, nothing more is known of the occasion on which it was given. Lutheran Quarterly is pleased to bring it to the attention of our readers in this summer issue of the journal, historically as a reflection of the 1960s and homiletically in time to inspire preachers to make Reformation 2011 the occasion to proclaim once again the radical gospel of God's righteousness for sinners, that the news may grant freedom from the "self-centered cultivation of our own piety," and so that we might be of some earthly good for the well being of the creation and the neighbors with whom we share it.

As a basis for what I have to say this evening, I shall read from the beginning of Luther's treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian*, written in the early years of the Reformation (1520). It was sent to Pope Leo X, among Luther's last attempts at reconciliation:

Many people have considered Christian faith an easy thing, and not a few have given it a place among the virtues. They do this because they have not experienced it and have never tasted the great strength there is in faith. It is impossible to write well about it or to understand what has been written about it unless one has at one time or another experienced the courage which faith gives a man when trials oppress him. But he who has had even a faint taste of it can never write, speak, meditate, or hear enough concerning it. It is a living "spring of water welling up to eternal life," as Christ calls it in John 4 [14]. As for me, although I have no wealth of faith to boast of and know how scant my supply is, I nevertheless hope that I have attained to a little faith, even though I have been assailed by

great and various temptations; and I hope that I can discuss it, if not more elegantly, certainly more to the point, than those literalists and subtle disputants have previously done, who have not even understood what they have written.

To make the way smoother for the unlearned—for only them do I serve—I shall set down the following two propositions concerning the freedom and the bondage of the spirit:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

These two theses seem to contradict each other. If, however, they should be found to fit together they would serve our purpose beautifully. Both are Paul's own statements, who says in I Cor 9 [19]: "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all," and in Rom 13 [8], "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." Love by its very nature is ready to serve and to subject oneself to him who is loved. So Christ, although he was Lord of all, was "born of woman, born under the law" [Gal 4:4], and therefore was at the same time a free man and a servant, "in the form of God" and "of a servant" [Phil 2:6-7]. [LW 31:343-44]

Four hundred and fifty years ago there was a reformation. Four hundred and fifty years ago our fathers in the faith had the guts and the freedom to stand up against centuries of encrusted traditions and say, No! We will tear down the whole thing and start all over again if need be, and we will reshape the church, reform it to accord better with the needs and demands of our time.

But that was four hundred and fifty years ago. What about today? Today too there is reform in the air. All about us there are reform movements and situations crying out for reform. Our Roman Catholic brothers are reforming. Other churches in Christendom are reforming. Indeed, one might say that the ecumenical movement itself is a type of reform. A reformation seeking to recover the community that was lost because of the upheaval caused by the first reformation. Not only are churches reforming their attitudes towards the world and its problems, towards society and its ills, the problems of race and social injustice, the problems of suffering humanity calling for help. Reform and revaluation are part of the very air we breathe. Only, now the shoe seems to be on the other foot. Others are reforming. What about us? Four hundred and fifty years ago we

Lutherans were the radicals. What about today? Are we today simply the last leaf on the tree of reactionary conservatism? Left out in the cold nursing our old prejudices and fears? Shall it be true of us, as someone has said, that we are the least capable of reformation today because we think we already have it?

Do we really have the freedom to reform today? That is the question we must ask ourselves on this 450th Anniversary of the Reformation. For why, after all, do we celebrate the Reformation? Certainly not merely to rehearse old hatreds and cement old prejudices. Not to pat ourselves on the back of idolatry. We celebrate the Reformation because reform is really a great event, because it has become part of the permanent life of the church. It is not something which happened once and then is over. It is something, the reformers said, which must become a permanent part of the church's life. The church must reform itself in every age. We celebrate to draw strength for what lies ahead.

The question for us today is: How about it? Do we have the freedom to reform? Do we have the freedom to reach across the gulfs of fear and misunderstanding and grasp the hand of our Catholic brothers? Do we have the freedom to grasp the hand of our black brothers? Do we have the freedom to listen and heed the cries of suffering humanity? We must find the freedom to reform today.

The reason why I chose as my text for tonight the words from Luther's treatise on Christian liberty is that I am convinced that one of the first things we have to do today is to go back and draw on some the resources of that first Reformation 450 years ago—and to use these resources, not as clubs with which to fight old battles, but as a source of strength with which to fight new ones. To use these words as a mirror to hold up against ourselves, to ask, "How do we measure up to what we started out to be?" For if we are going to find the freedom to reform today, and if we are not to betray that first reformation, then we must draw from that same well from which Luther drew, the gospel of freedom given by God in Jesus Christ. As a historian, I am convinced that we will find there something vital and powerful, something radical, something that we have failed to grasp.

So I have chosen as my text tonight those famous words from Luther's *Treatise on Christian Freedom* to see if perhaps we cannot

recapture something of the spirit, the excitement of the original reformation for our time. The whole of Luther's treatise on Christian freedom revolves around the two propositions: "*A Christian is a perfectly free Lord of all, subject to none,*" and "*A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.*" What does it mean to put these two sentences together when they seem directly to contradict each other? We have always been puzzled about that, I think, precisely because we have failed to see just how radical Luther was. In order to get at what he is saying, let us take them apart and consider them one by one, and put them back together.

So, the first proposition: "*A Christian is a perfectly free Lord of all, subject to none.*" What does that mean? The answer is that it means just what it says! A Christian is subject to absolutely no one or anything. It means that because of God's act in Jesus Christ, that which makes you to be a Christian, you are absolutely free from all the nonsense that people usually and inevitably associate with the name of religion. It means that God has taken care of everything that has to do with your relationship to him. You are subject to no one, no institution, no set of rules, no laws, nothing, absolutely nothing. You are free, absolutely free! God alone, absolutely, has done everything. Or to put it even more strongly: God has, in effect, through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, put up for the entire world a blazing KEEP OUT sign over the whole province of religion and salvation. This, God has said, is my business alone. He has put you, and every one of us, out of the salvation business, and shoved us out into the world where our real business is. That, really, is what Luther meant when he insisted that salvation is by grace alone, *sola gratia*. It means that God has an absolute monopoly on the salvation business, and that you are free, absolutely free, when you simply take God at his word. He has made you a free Lord of all things!

Think of it! When, in the entire history of the church, has anything so radical, so optimistic, so bold ever been said about humanity? Usually we hear that Luther was so pessimistic and gloomy, so insistent upon human sinfulness and total worthlessness. But what about this? A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none! Did Luther really mean it? Can we take him at his word here? It seems so dangerous, so reckless, and so foolhardy. So much so that

we are afraid to believe it! And that, I am afraid, is precisely the way we react. Right here we reach the critical point: the fear of this freedom. We are afraid of it because we are not sure where it will lead. We are afraid to say that humans are set free because then who is to make sure that they will be kept religious and moral? That is where the battle is lost. We say to ourselves “well, of course, he didn’t really mean it just that way!” and then the scale which was balanced so delicately just on the brink of success wavers and falls back in the other direction, and we begin to say that the believer is not really free, but that there are after all certain religious rules that one had better live up to. We begin to set up all kinds of forms and standards and laws and rules, usually of a very petty little sort that one must conform to in order to be accounted properly religious. Somehow we get sucked back into the whole machinery of religion, we get sucked back into the salvation business ourselves—making it seem that even if God does most of it, nevertheless there is that little bit we have to do ourselves. Instead of Christian freedom to move out and do something really big and worthwhile, we get Christianity. We try to put Christ to work in the penny-ante business of making us religious. Faith is no longer a declaration of independence, but a sickly introverted groveling around in the morass of our own religiosity. In place of freedom, we have bondage to “churchianity” and religion.

Let me try to illustrate what I mean by an example. A fellow came to see me because he was worried about this radical freedom. He said he couldn’t understand how it applied to what was usually called “the Christian life.” “Is it not true” he asked, “that one must get help, get grace and strength to overcome sins in one’s own life? Must one not apply himself and Christ’s grace to the rooting out of what we call ‘secret sins’ and the like? How can you say that the Christian is really free? Must he not strive to live up to the law?” There, you see, is precisely the kind of nonsense we have always gotten bogged down in all these years, especially in our pietistic traditions. We just can’t seem to get it through our heads just how radical the grace of God, this gift of freedom, is. For the whole point is that God in Jesus Christ simply wipes such things off the slate forever precisely in order that they may be forgotten and we may get on to something more important. But no! We insist that we know better. We refuse to

hear the word of forgiveness and freedom. We want to put Jesus to work at that penny-ante business of helping us out with our self-centered religion, helping us out with something we call our "secret sins," or whatever. And then all is lost because we use Jesus for our own petty little projects. Faith becomes perverted into an individualistic, self-centered cultivation of one's own piety. To all intents and purposes we are useless to the world. Like Captain Ahab in Melville's *Moby Dick*, we are all wrapped up in ourselves. Melville says of him:

Though nominally included in the census of Christendom, he was still an alien to it. He lived in the world, as the last of the Grisly Bears lived in settled Missouri. And as when Spring and Summer had departed, that wild Logan of the woods, burying himself in the hollow of a tree, lived out the winter there, sucking his own paws; so, in his inclement, howling old age, Ahab's soul, shut up in the caved trunk of his body, there fed upon the sullen paws of gloom!

That is what we have become like. Shut up in our pietistic little enclaves, feeding on our own gloomy sins.

What then happens to the church? The church becomes an irrelevant little club which is supposed to be concerned, quite naturally, with producing this introverted piety. It doesn't have anything to do with the world, really, it is merely some kind of "salvation machine"—a place where people go who want to be religious so that they will be sure to get out of the world all right in the end. Instead of being a place where it is proclaimed that God is in the salvation business all alone, the church takes over the business itself. The church becomes the cultivator of religion, which holds over people's heads all the rules for making them religious. And, in case you have forgotten, that is exactly the kind of thing against which Luther was rebelling—a church which had set up a salvation business of its own. The whole point here is that such a church cannot change, it cannot reform because it itself has fallen captive to the eternal, changeless form of freedom. It cannot preach the message of radical freedom from all religion because it is in the religion business itself. It cannot reform because that would be to destroy its own business, to preach itself out of a job. Hence it becomes bound to itself, it has no freedom to move. Then its entire theology is nothing other than one big excuse for not doing anything at all of

importance in the world—a gigantic defense mechanism to protect the status quo and remain captive to the dead past.

This is where we must take a good look at ourselves today. This is our problem. What about us? Can the church express itself on social issues? Oh no! The church is concerned with individual salvation and not with society! Can the church rewrite its teaching material so as to bring it up to date with what our children are already learning in the public schools? Oh no! We can't say anything different from what we said three or four hundred years ago because that might offend someone! Can the church extend its hand to its Catholic brothers? Oh no! They have the wrong kind of religion and they're not going to change and we're not going to change because religions can't change and so we must hate each other because that's part of our religion. Should the church be concerned about poverty? Oh no! That's a political matter and one should not mix politics and religion. Should the church be involved in any way in the fight for justice for our black brothers—perhaps even just a bare minimum of justice like fair housing? Oh no! All that is social gospel and politics or what not and everyone knows how bad all those things are! After all we are justified by faith, not by works! Great God in heaven, what are we doing? Wherever you turn, all you get is one big excuse for not doing anything. Somehow the whole theology we use today seems to have turned out to be nothing but a vast, diabolically constructed machine, well-oiled and precision-tooled, which protects us from doing anything. The church is all bound up in itself, afraid of its own shadow, unable to budge an inch, a slave to its own past. Where is that Christian of whom Luther spoke? That Christian who is free Lord of all, subject to none? Buried somewhere, I am afraid, under the rubble of these 450 years.

How did he get buried? Precisely because we have not been ready nor perhaps willing really to hear the radical message of freedom. We have preferred the comforts of religion to the power of the gospel. It was the radical message of freedom that made Luther a reformer. It was from this that he drew the power to become a reformer, to stand up against everyone and everything and say, "Here I stand, I can do no other!" If we are to have the freedom to reform today we must hear again that same call to freedom—freedom from religion, from

bondage to the past. There is nothing to fear in this. Luther was not afraid to say that humans are radically free, because he knew that only Christ could set a person free, and that if a person is set free by Christ, then nothing will go wrong. He knew that through this radical freedom one is released for the first time to begin to accomplish something for someone else. For the whole point, you see, is that God does not need our works, but our neighbor does. We need not spend our time trying to please God, but we must spend it for our neighbor. God has set us free from the burden of religion to serve our neighbor.

This, of course, brings us to Luther's second statement: "*A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.*" I think you can see already how the two statements go together. They are two sides of the same coin. It is precisely because of the radical freedom that the Christian can be a servant, the one who reaches out his hand without reservation to his brother in need, wherever or whoever he may be. One who is not free, who is bound up with religion, is too concerned with himself and his own individual salvation to help anyone else. Usually all he will do is construct religious excuses—about not mixing religion with social concerns. He is not free. He cannot really serve his brother. Just as the one who is all bound by property and money cannot serve because he is not free. He can't help out his black brother, he can't go out on a limb even for basic justice. He is not free, hence he cannot serve. He can't sing that stanza of the Reformation hymn: "A Mighty Fortress."

Let goods and kindred go,
this mortal life also;
the body they may kill:
God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.

You can't sing that unless you are free. Perfect freedom is this: precisely because Christ was radically free, he could go all the way to the cross for us. And he gives us this freedom so that we can, as Luther put it, become Christs for our neighbor. God pushes us out of the salvation business into the business of serving our neighbor.

Let us not, please, have any more nonsense about mixing the gospel with social causes. For the whole point here is that no one mixes the gospel with anything! God is in the salvation business all alone. That is precisely the source of freedom. But our trouble has been that while we have resisted mixing the gospel with some really worthwhile causes, we have not been afraid to mix it with all sorts of worthless causes—with cookies and cake, with useless programs and social gatherings! If we were going to mix, why didn't we mix it with some worthwhile causes that would be of some help to our suffering brothers? But the point is that there is no mixture allowed at all. The gospel is the absolute gift of freedom. The one who receives this gift has absolutely nothing left to do but to serve the neighbor. Even though there is no mixture, the gospel leaves you with absolutely nothing else to do. If that is a social gospel, so be it. But I just don't know what else Luther was talking about when he said that a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. He doesn't say dutiful to the church, not to the white community, not just to Protestants, but to all. I don't know how much more social you can get than that!

You see, Luther heard the message. He heard the radical good news. There was nothing else to do but shout it from the rooftops. He found the freedom. Hearing in faith the gospel of God's righteousness "for you" set Luther free. That is the whole thing. That is what we need today. We must get out of the ruts we have gotten ourselves into. We must claim once again this freedom that has claimed us, and put it to work. For it is the very nature of the church. Then we shall have the freedom to reform and recover some of the excitement of being a Christian— perfectly free, Lord of all; perfectly dutiful, servant of all.



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